Historicising the Post 9/11 Afghan-Pakistani Experiences: A Study of Nadeem Aslam's Select Novels

PhD Synopsis

Submitted to the Department of English

Bodoland University

Research Scholar: Bigrai Basumatary

Enrollment No: ENGPHD202103

Registration No: ENG00419 of 2021-2022

Supervisor: Dr. Rustam Brahma

Statement of the Problem:

9/11 has been one of the most pivotal moments in the history of 21st century that completely changed the world order. It changed the way international politics worked and domestic national policies were made. It enabled in an unprecedented power granted to counter-terrorism projects. After World War II, the world had not witnessed a coalition of powerful countries fighting a global war ('war against terror') that led to the killings of many. Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affair's study group, *The Cost of War Project* estimates 929,000 people to have died in post 9/11 wars due to direct war violence. The number of death however exceeds from 1 to about 2 million including the civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq. The war also created about 38 million refugees and displaced persons. The immediate military response to 9/11 led the way, with United Nations Security Council adopting Resolution 1368 on the next day after 9/11 attacks. According to Kent Roach "This resolution has been interpreted by some as recognizing the right of the United States to use self-defense against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan" (Roach, 29) and it "seemed to favor an enforcement over a war model by calling on all states "to work together urgently to bring to justice" and hold "accountable" those who perpetrated, organized, aided, or harbored those who were responsible for 9/11" (ibid). While an aggressive military intervention caught up the imagination of the global public, especially America and the West[1], the cultural response of the west to 9/11 is seen to be myopic and without nuances that hinges on the edge of hatred and pursues a simplistic black and white formula of dividing the world between good and evil, heroes and villains.

Given the unprecedented nature of the event with all its implications, being aggrieved can be understood as the most natural momentary response to it. But, the wider, sustained and sober cultural response to this event from the Western pockets is also premised upon the pre-existing notion of good and evil. The values of western democracy, freedom, development etc. championed by US are projected to be the principles worth fighting for against the barbaric tradition and fundamentalism bred in Islam as the forces of good against evil. Anti-muslim sentiments and racism rose remarkably following the 9/11 attacks in the USA as documented by Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a legal advocacy organization fighting for civil rights and justice. Islamophobia got a strong and renewed currency after 9/11 attacks which are manifested in the legislations, news media circulation, production of cultural industries like movies, and television shows and changed perceptions about Muslims. The new genre of fiction called '9/11 literature' or '9/11 fiction' as a cultural response to the event puts the American experience of loss, grief, fear, uncertainty, trauma, security and politics at the centre stage to the exclusion of complex contexts and to the point of stereotyping and sweeping generalization of Muslim community. The 'Othering' of the Muslims in the wake of 9/11 attacks is apparent in the politics through policy changes, democratic state turning into a police-state in monitoring and putting on surveillance of a particular group of people. This so-called 'Othering' is also evidenced through the discursive practice of which the emerging 9/11 fiction is a prominent example. Don Delillo's essay *In the ruins of future* published in Harper's Magazine just three months after 9/11 is one telling example of cultural production which pivots only on the American experience of the injury missing the diachronic contexts leading to the event which implicitly indicts the other party or more specifically the entire Muslim community in the world. While the Western reception of 9/11 is a cocooned isolation in their pain posing military and discursive stance of

vengeance, Arundhati Roy raises the concern of the other aggrieved party in her opinion piece titled *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* published in *The Guardian* by asking pertinent questions like "How many dead Iraqis will it take to make the world a better place? How many dead Afghans for every American? How many dead children for every dead man? How many dead mujahideen for each dead investment banker?" (Roy, 225). In *Framing Muslims—Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*, the authors Morey & Yaqin deconstruct the asymmetry between reality and representation of Muslims and reveal "…the restricted, limited ways that Muslims are stereotyped and "framed" within political, cultural, and media discourses of the west" (Morey & Yaqin, 2) and how "the reach of today's global media conglomerates and tangled machinations give the structures of representation… a fierce power and extensive reach" (ibid, 3). In the wake of 9/11 and limiting Western narratives, it is apt for a research intervention to situate the event of 9/11 in its complex historical contexts by looking at it diachronically following the literature emerging from the alternative end and questioning the process of 'Othering' and its limitation. In that regard, the present research aims to study the select fiction of British-Pakistani author Nadeem Aslam which primarily situates the Muslim experiences of the events prior to 9/11 leading to it and after.

Literature Review:

To map the research area, relevant resources and literatures are consulted from which theoretical and hypothetical bases will be borrowed. The followings are the literature reviewed for the proposed research.

Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001,* published in 2004 offers an account of America's

involvement during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and how the CIA with its Pakistani counterpart Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) colluded in building the Taliban to counter the expansion of Communist bloc. His next book titled *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* published in 2008 is a follow up to the previous one which expands and offers detailed insights into the complex military, and diplomatic entanglements following the event of 9/11.

Bruce Ridel's *What We Won—America's Secret War in Afghanistan 1979-98* published in 2014 is another account of the complex war fought in Afghanistan during Soviet invasion and America's prominent role in overseeing it by raising the mujahideen, dealing with Afghan communists, Russian troops, Pakistan and Saudis without directly sending its soldiers on the ground. As a former intelligence operative, Ridel's book offers an insightful account of the event unfolding from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to its withdrawal.

Mohammad Yousaf's book with Mark Adkin titled *Afghanistan: The Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower* (2001) is an insider's account of the raising and training and funding of the Taliban jointly with America's CIA and Pakistan's ISI. Authored by a former ISI rank holder heading Afghan Bureau, the books offer a detailed account of how the Taliban was created and how it defeated the Soviet army in what is now known as 'Russia's Vietnam'. Written by a former ISI rank holder, the book makes official the many conjectures regarding the collusion of America and Pakistan in managing and financing a proxy war in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation.

Anand Gopal's *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* (2014) is an attempt at understanding the terrible war from the Afghan point of

view. America's messy involvement in Afghanistan, rampant corruption in the US installed civilian government, and the Taliban problem and what it means to the Afghans have been insightfully narrated from the native's perspective. The text offers a critical understanding of the complexity and instability in Afghanistan since the beginning of the war.

Artemy M. Kalinovsky's *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (2011) is an important text that brings to the fore the Russian perspective on Afghanistan's occupation and withdrawal from it. As the Russian perspective is discounted in most Western discourses, the text is a rare opportunity for understanding the critical and detailed analysis of Soviet Russia's political gamble with Afghanistan. The book also alludes to Russia's insecurity regarding the Western Bloc's expansionist aspiration in the region that prompted its invasion of Afghanistan.

Garrett Graff's *The Only Plane in the Sky—An Oral History of 9/11* (2019) is a voluminous oral account of about 500 people—survivors, frontline rescue workers, bystanders, administrators etc. who lived through the most traumatic events in their lives and in the immediate memories of their nation. This book is a heartbreaking record of the tragedy witnessed and testified by the Americans.

Kent Roach's *The 9/11 Effect: Comparative Counter-Terrorism* (2011) gives a scholarly account of the United Nations' response to 9/11 by adopting a number of resolutions paving the way for a redefined war on terror. The author also highlights how these prompt moves of the UN were mobilized and lobbied by the US. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the UN at the behest of America laid out the parameters of the contemporary global war on terror.

Lucy Bond in his *Frames of Memory after 9/11: Culture, Criticism, Politics, Law* (2015) studies the emerging scholarship around 9/11 and discusses its memory and utilization in different

spheres ranging from politics to law to culture. The author also draws our attention to analogizing the 9/11 with Holocaust. The book gives an account of the different contexts in which memory of the event is used for political, legal, and cultural appropriation.

Don Delillo's essay *In the Ruins of the Future* (2001) first published in Harper's Magazine highlights the American experience of grief and loss. The loss expressed here is not necessarily the Twin Tower symbolized in their fall but rather the technology and its future, America and its progressive way of life in the world which are under threat. The author believes that it is the American way of life that terrorists hate. The essay as it fervently argues for American culture and its right to thrive takes lesser time in caricaturing the other community by merely rejecting terrorism and terrorists.

Ann Keniston & Jeanne Follansbee Quinn edited *Literature after 9/11* (2007) offers a reading of emerging literature focused on the trauma of the event. Trauma becomes an important watchword in literature as well as in American public life since the occurrence of the event which finds its representation in the literatures produced. Similarly, Richard Gray's *After the Fall—American Literature Since 9/11* (2011) expands on the trauma issue following the event. In his text, Gray argues that in the event of 9/11 the writers came to an agreement on 'the failure of language' to fully articulate it. As a result of 9/11, in American writing, he detects that "Disorientation is certainly a feature of writing in America after the fall…" (14-15).

While a vast body of western scholarship and the cultural response of the west post 9/11 singularly capitalized on the indictment of Islam and the Muslim world, Arundhati Roy in her seminal opinion piece published in *The Guardian* titled *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001) suggests reading the event of 9/11 in its alternative perspective drawing on the complex history

of America's role in creating the monster called Taliban which it now seeks to fight armed to the teeth.

Judith Butler's *Precious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (2004) concerns itself with the question of subjectivity and agency. Following the event of 9/11, what Butler observes in the US lead war on terror is taking away of agency from a particular group of people (in avenging the right and privilege of another) and the rights-group in ensuring that.

Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin's *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* published in 2011 draws attention to the problematic public representation of Muslims which are nothing but the disturbing caricature of Muslims that feed the hatred and confirmation bias. This text is an apt intervention in calling the distorted image of Muslims sold in the west.

Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) offers a detailed account of the ideology and discursive practice at work in stereotyping oriental cultures. The stereotypes as a result end up being mistaken for the ossified *de facto* feature of the oriental subjects. Said's *Orientalism* is a classic example of the process of 'Orientalizing' the Orient or 'Othering'. In his essay published in The Nation in 1980 titled *Islam Through Western Eyes,* Edward Said specifically addresses the narrow and constricted idea of Islam created and circulated in the West, similar to the process of stereotype and 'othering' described in his previous book.

Frederick Quinn's *The Sum of All Heresies: The Image of Islam Thought* (2007) gives a historical account of the prejudiced reception of Islam from its early days to the present time. The Prophet as anti-Christ or Arab Lucifer and a prejudiced supposition around the Prophet's sex life etc. are some of the enduring images from Islam's early days in Western thought and scholarship. Even though the author gives a handful of examples of Islam in European literature

and thought, he is of the view that these few positive images are yet not able to correct the negative stereotyping of Islam that has pervaded for ages.

In *Islam and the Question of Reform: Critical Voices from Muslim Communities* (2008) edited by Benjamin MacQueen, Kylie Baxter and Rebecca Barlow discusses the call for reformation with regard to certain Islamic tenets pertaining to women's right, gender justice, human rights and justice in general. The achievement of these reform movements in some of the most orthodox Muslim nations challenges the western assumption of Islam and Muslim societies as atavistic or medieval.

Madeline Clements' *Writing Islam from a South Asian Muslim Perspective: Rushdie, Hamid, Aslam, Shamsie* (2016) studies the fiction of four contemporary South Asian authors writing about the varying experiences of Muslim lives post 9/11 and the diverse ways their fictional characters affiliate, associate, dissociate themselves with fundamental teachings of Islam, fundamentalism, terrorism in negotiating their identities.

Research Gap:

In the survey of the literature, keeping the research area in mind, a significant body of scholarship and literary response to 9/11 basing American experience of grief and pain is found which received the historic event synchronically and directed the short-sighted analysis of it to Islamophobia, stereotype and indictment of Muslims. In the wake of 9/11 with the 'War on Terror and war of narratives, a few Muslim authors have responded to the demonization of Muslims through their literary works. But considerable attention has not been given to the alternative Muslim voices emerging post 9/11. The survey of literature informs of a lacuna,

calling for a research intervention on the emergent alternate Muslim voices on the issues of 9/11 and its aftermath.

Thus, informed by this research gap, the present research intends to study the fiction of British-Pakistani author Nadeem Aslam which is prominently set in the background of 9/11 for a detailed and contextual understanding of it.

Research Questions:

To pursue the present research, the following questions are posed:

1. How does Nadeem Aslam's fiction look for an alternative plot to the background of 9/11 challenging the Western narratives?
2. How does Nadeem Aslam critique the dangers and limitations of 'Othering' in his fiction?
3. Can Nadeem Aslam's writing (and writings like his) create an alternative body of knowledge of 9/11 and the human cost of the 'War on Terror'?

Research Objectives:

This research's objectives are;

1. To contribute to the objective and contextual study of fiction written on or around 9/11
2. To break the negative stereotyping of Muslims post 9/11
3. To critique and expose the limitation of 'Othering'

Research Methodology:

The present research will be qualitative and interpretive research based on textual analysis. To pursue the research with the research questions and objectives in mind, the conceptual idea of 'Other' and the process of 'Othering' from Postcolonial Theory and the dialectics of socio-cultural, political and historical contexts emphasized in New Historicism will be borrowed as research tools to interpret the select texts.

Tentative Chapterization:

This research will have its thesis divided into the following chapter scheme.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter will delineate the research area and the objectives of conducting such research. It will discuss in brief the selected author and the body of his works, and their contexts. It will also highlight the research orientation and the conceptual and theoretical positioning of the proposed research.

Chapter 2: The Post 9/11 Afghan-Pakistani Counter Narrative

This chapter will explore the war of narratives around the event of 9/11. While the western narrative is dominant and an indictment of Islam and the Muslims, there is an emerging counter narrative from the Muslim communities across the globe which stands to offer their experience of the event and its aftermath. This chapter will discuss the counter narrative of the Muslim communities expressed by prominent Muslim authors.

Chapter 3: The Cold War in Afghanistan: Reconstructing History in *The Wasted Vigil*

In this chapter the selected text will be analysed against the historical and political contexts emphasized in the New Historicist criticism. The novel starts from the post 9/11 ruin in Afghanistan and traces the history back to the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan through the character of Lara and her search for her brother Benedict, who defecated from the Soviet Army during the occupation. In course of her search, history is dug out fresh and anew, opening wounds, and revealing its complex contours. The novel goes back to the Cold War period suggesting the giant superpowers' quest for mastery where smaller nations and communities become collateral. It will also analyse the emergence of the Taliban, America's Frankenstein to fight its dirty war in Afghanistan against the Soviets and challenge the popular narratives created post 9/11 regarding Muslim communities.

Chapter 4: Allies and Enemies: 9/11 and Its Shockwaves in *The Blind Man's Garden*

This chapter will analyse the novel for the post 9/11 ruins and rubbles in Afghanistan and beyond. While 'War on Terror' or 'Jihad' sound uplifting rhetorically, in actuality the implication of these words or phrases are death, destruction, tragedy and trauma. These phrases or words have defined the entire life of people in some parts of the world. Situated in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the novel traces the intensification of the war in Afghanistan post 9/11 and the equally destructive counter to it in the form of Jihad. The chapter will also analyse the unholy alliances made or broken for personal reasons under the guise of jihad or fighting terrorism. Following 9/11 and its global call for war on terror, this chapter will do a contextual analysis of the ugly truths and outcomes of the so called war on either side.

Chapter 5: Exploring Hatred and Fissures in *The Golden Legend*

This chapter will analyse the lingering impact of post 9/11 'War on Terror' on the social life of the people beyond Afghanistan. Set in Pakistan, the novel traces the injured Muslim sentiment post 9/11 and the way it is manifested in the rift and fissures in the cross cultural existence. In the wake of war, the pre-existing rifts become redefined and prominent and the hatred is directed against the immediate opponents like America, India, and Israel and the heightened fundamentalism finds its enemy among the people of their own. This chapter will analyse the extreme level of polarization in some parts of the Muslim world due to historical circumstances.

Chapter 6: 'Stereotype' and 'Othering': Aspects of Coexistence in *Maps for Lost Lovers* and Other Novels

This chapter will analyse the politics of 'othering' in the selected novels which serve a specific purpose. Drawing from Postcolonial theory, the concept of 'other' and 'othering', the chapter will show its limitations of it by analysing stories and characters that don't fit within the confines of us vs. them. While the larger and more effective discursive practice of 'Othering' has been detected in the West, this chapter will analyse that 'othering' as a process of stereotyping, hatred and negating someone can be done by anybody including the Muslims and the dangers and limitations pertaining to this practice. By a joint study of three novels written in the background of 9/11 and one outside the context of 9/11, the chapter will analyse Nadeem Aslam's critique of 'othering' and his take on co-existence.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The chapter will delineate the findings of the research conducted. In this chapter, the fulfilment or achievement of each specific research question will be discussed along with suggestions on the prospects and possibilities for future research in this area.

Bibliography

Primary Source:

Aslam, Nadeem. *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Vintage, 2004.

--- *The Wasted Vigil*. Faber and Faber Ltd, 2008.

--- *The Blind Man's Garden*. Faber and Faber Ltd, 2013.

--- *The Golden Legend*. Hamish Hamilton, 2017.

Secondary Source:

Bond, Lucy. *Frames of Memory after 9/11: Culture, Criticism, Politics, Law*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Butler, Judith. *Precious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.

Clements, Madeline. *Writing Islam from a South Asian Muslim Perspective: Rushdie, Hamid, Aslam, Shamsie*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. Penguin Books, 2004.

--- *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Penguin Press, 2018.

Delillo, Don. "In the Ruins of the Future" *Harper's Magazine*, Dec. 2001 Issue, https://harpers.org/archive/2001/12/in-the-ruins-of-the-future/

Gopal, Anand. *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes*. Picador, 2014, 2015 Reprint Edition.

Graff, Garrett M. *The Only Plane in the Sky—An Oral History of 9/11*. Avid Reader Press, 2019.

Gray, Richard. *After the Fall—American Literature Since 9/11*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2011.

Kalinovsky, Artemy M. *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

Keniston, Ann, and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, eds. *Literature after 9/11*. Routledge, 2008.

MacQueen, Benjamin., et al. *Islam and the Question of Reform: Critical Voices from Muslim Communities*. Melbourne University Press, 2008.

Morey, Peter and Amina Yaqin, eds. *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/*11. Harvard University Press, 2011.

Quinn, Frederick. *The Sum of All Heresies: The Image of Islam Thought.* Oxford University Press, 2008.

Ridel, Bruce. *What We Won—America's Secret War in Afghanistan 1979-98*. The Brookings Institute, 2014.

Roach, Kent. *The 9/11 Effect: Comparative Counter-Terrorism*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Roy, Arundhati. "The Algebra of Infinite Justice" *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. Penguin Books, 2001, 2002.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Penguin Books, 1995, 2001 Reprint.

--- "Islam Through Western Eyes" *The Nation*, April 26, 1980, http://www.google.com/amp/s/www.thenation.com/article/archive/islam-through-western-eyes/tnamp/

Yousaf, Mohammad and Mark Adkin. *Afghanistan: The Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower*. Casement Pub & Book Dist Ltd, 2001.

---

[1] (The term 'West' is not used here to refer to the geographical entity but to mean the presumed discursive ideological positioning of the 'West' deconstructed in Postcolonial theoretical discourses. The term 'West' here includes the USA for the same presumed ideological positioning of itself as being superior)
--